



# VA VISN 2 Center of Excellence for SUICIDE PREVENTION

# NEWS

May 2015

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### Recent CoE Publications

## Understanding Veteran Suicides – VA's Behavioral Health Autopsy Program

Veterans currently account for an estimated one in five deaths by suicide in the United States. Statistics like this are why Suicide Prevention is a VA priority. One program specifically designed to advance VA's suicide prevention efforts is BHAP, the Behavioral Health Autopsy Program. Conducted by the VA VISN 2 Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, CoE, BHAP is a quality improvement program that seeks to understand the context of Veterans' lives prior to their suicides.

BHAP is directed by Dr. Jan Kemp, the CoE's Associate Director & Director of Education. Dr. Kemp launched the program in 2009 after identifying the need to collect information about Veterans' lives prior to suicide so as to help inform VA health care services and suicide prevention efforts.

### Three perspectives are better than one

To understand the context of Veterans' lives prior to suicide, BHAP collects information from three different, though complimentary, sources. These sources offer three perspectives on the Veteran's general health, mental health, relationships, and engagement in care prior to their death by suicide. The three sources include:

**Phase 1** Standardized chart reviews of Veterans' medical records

**Phase 2** Telephone interviews with Veterans' family members and/or close friends

**Phase 3** Clinician Reviews of Veterans' Care prior to their deaths (planned for FY2015)

Currently, the BHAP team at CoE collects and analyzes information from chart reviews and family interviews for each death by suicide reported to VA clinicians. At the same time they are ramping up to include Phase 3, the *Clinician Interview* later this year. According to Dr. Kemp who leads the team, “The third phase of BHAP will incorporate interviews with the last medical provider who treated the Veteran. We hope these interviews will bring personal insights by incorporating the opinions and recommendations



# BHAP

of the providers. This will help VA understand what is working and what modifications should be made at the clinical level in order to reduce Veteran suicides."

## Preliminary Results Can Help Veterans

To date, the BHAP data collected from nearly 1200 cases has helped to shed light on the factors that appear to be related to Veterans' suicides.

"What is unique about BHAP is that we get Veterans stories from three different perspectives," said Dr. Stephanie Gamble, who manages the program at CoE, "These stories bring out the Veterans' lives, not just their suicides. The information also helps us to answer the question: What were the factors in this Veteran's life that might help us prevent Veteran Suicides in the future?" One of the most critical aspects of BHAP involves reaching out to family members who have lost their loved ones to suicide. All of those who conduct interviews with a close family member, significant other or friend of a Veteran who died by suicide are trained mental health professionals and handle the call with integrity and respect. While discussing the loss of a loved one can be trying for families, interviewers have reported that there is sometimes a sense of relief in the idea that their story may help others in the future. BHAP Interviewers invite family members to share their accounts of their loved ones' lives prior to their deaths. Family members are also asked about Veterans' access and barriers to care. They are also asked to give their own suggestions on how to improve VA Suicide Prevention programs.

"We have found from the family interviews that even when they feel that a Veteran had access to mental healthcare services, often that Veteran was too proud or too independent to seek out and accept that help," said Dr. Kemp, "Families have let us know that they wanted additional ways to talk to their Veterans. In response we are creating more awareness

products around stigma. [The Power of One](#) is an example of a VA media campaign that targets this need by providing talking points and emphasizing that one small act is sometimes all it takes to shift the mindset of a Veteran in crisis."

So far, some of the key findings from *Chart Reviews* reveal that the five most commonly reported symptoms Veterans experience preceding suicide are: depression, anxiety, sleep problems, isolation and increased agitation.

Other Chart Review findings suggest:

- A history of relationship problems preceding suicide are common
- Over half of Veterans who died by suicide did not have a prior suicide attempt on record
- A relationship between unsafe storage of a firearm and an increased risk for suicide

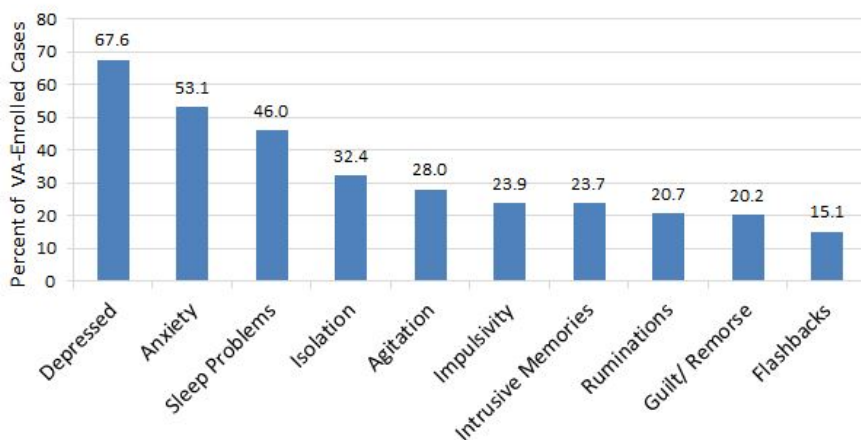
Dr. Gamble notes that findings from BHAP help to shape VA's Suicide Prevention programs. For example, BHAP findings concerning the role of unsafe firearm storage underscore the importance of programs like the VA's Free Gun Safety Lock program for Veterans.

## Looking ahead

As the BHAP program continues to expand, the information collected will be used to shape VA suicide prevention efforts. The objective is to identify and treat upstream risk factors to prevent Veterans from getting to a point of despair.

Dr. Kemp is excited about the future: "BHAP is already helping us better understand the risk factors for suicide that weigh heavily on Veterans," she said. "As we move into Phase Three and expand, we expect that BHAP will become an even more powerful tool for informing Veteran suicide prevention programs."

## Chart Review Findings of Veterans' Prominent Symptoms Prior to Suicide Sample size (n=1138)





**Dr. Marek  
Kopacz**

Listen to the  
Podcast [here](#)

## Spirituality, Suicide & Veterans

The premiere of a new Podcast Series [Spiritual Thinkers of Today](#) features Dr. Marek Kopacz, a researcher with the VA VISN 2 Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, CoE. Dr. Kopacz, whose work focuses on the crossroads between spirituality, religion and suicide, caught the attention of podcast producers at the "Spirituality Mind Body Institute" (SMBI) at Teachers College, Columbia University because of a shared interest in exploring spirituality through the lens of science.

Dr. Kopacz's research at CoE aims to identify opportunities for enhancing spiritual and religious well-being in Veteran populations, with the goal of developing stronger and more effective suicide prevention programs. He discusses this work in the podcast as well as describes some of the difficulties faced by Veterans. "In recent years much has been said about various social, psychological and physical problems many Veterans face, less however about their spiritual problems," said Dr. Kopacz, "it struck me that the search for meaning, purpose and hope appeared to be a common thread."

Each of the SMBI podcasts will feature "world renowned scientists, educators, healers, and spiritual leaders, sharing their expertise and experiences." according to their website with the first episodes focusing on the theme "Suicide and the Military." Specific topics and participants include:

[Enhancing Spiritual Well-Being](#) - Dr. Marek Kopacz

[Moral Injury and Suicide in Veterans](#) - Dr. Joseph Currier, a clinical psychologist from the University of South Alabama

[Army Chaplains and Suicide Prevention](#) - Dr. Rajeev Ramchand, senior behavioral scientist at the RAND Corporation

[Risk and Resiliency in Veterans](#) - Dr. Craig Bryan, a licensed clinical psychologist and Associate Director of the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah

["The veteran spiritual struggle"](#), an article by Dr. Kopacz, was also published along with articles by Doctors Currier, Ramchand, and Bryan in the most recent issue of the APA journal, *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, as part of a special round-table discussion titled "Suicide and Spirituality in the Military".

An excerpt from "The veteran spiritual struggle" Read more [here](#)

Using the case of a Veteran named "John" (vital details changed to ensure patient anonymity), we illustrate the example of how spiritual struggle may manifest itself in older Veterans as a loss of personal meaning and purpose in life.

It occurred to him that he was no longer a husband, soldier, worker, or, seemingly, even a father. He complained of a sense of purposelessness and poignantly confided in his mental health care provider "Life is just filled with days . . . what is the point of going on?"





Clockwise from top, Dr. Stephanie Gamble, Dr. Kathy Heffner, Dr. Wil Pigeon, Dr. Jan Kemp

## The Power of One - 2015 VA/DoD Suicide Prevention Conference

Each year the US Department of Veterans Affairs, VA, and the Department of Defense, DoD, join forces to share advances in suicide prevention efforts. At this year's conference held in Dallas, researchers, educators, military operational leaders, clinicians including psychologists, social workers, physicians, nurses and counselors as well as Veterans, service members and their families came together around the theme "The Power of One".

### One Connection, One Conversation, One Small Act – It Matters

The theme originated from a joint VA/DoD campaign launched during Suicide Prevention Month last September. The Power of One promotes awareness that one small act can make a difference in the life of a Veteran, Service member or family member in crisis, perhaps even save a life.

Research suggests that Veteran and Military populations are both at a higher risk of suicide relative to the general population. This underscores the importance of interagency collaboration between VA and DoD. Such collaboration is not limited to the annual conference, but extends to the ability to collect and share data on suicide events, joint research and awareness raising, and sharing best practices for a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention and postvention.

The conference addressed a broad range of topics from emerging data to peer-to-peer support. Among participants from across VA mental health programs and medical centers, the Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, CoE, contributed:

- **"Suicide and Sleep"** a presentation by CoE Director of Research, Dr. Wil Pigeon about treating insomnia as a gateway to improving Mental Health wellness, preventing suicide and reducing stigma to seeking Mental Health care.
- **"VA Session - Education & Outreach"** co-led by CoE Associate Director and Director of Education, Dr. Jan Kemp with Dr. Caitlin Thompson for VA clinicians and providers including Suicide Prevention Coordinators on new policies, procedures and the latest best practices for identifying and treating Veterans at high risk.
- **"Safety Planning"** a Breakout Session led by CoE Researcher, Dr. Brooke Levandowski concerning research about the Safety Plan, a VA wide intervention for Veterans identified as high risk for suicide, from the perspective of VA behavioral health providers
- **"Talking about Hard things"** a Breakout Session co-led by CoE Researcher, Dr. Liz Karras on messaging and outreach around suicide prevention for Veterans and service members.
- **"BHAP – VA's Behavioral Autopsy Program"** a presentation by CoE Research Psychologist, Dr. Stephanie Gamble on the preliminary results from data collected through review of medical charts and interviews with family members of Veterans who died by suicide and new directions the program will take.
- **"SPAN"** a presentation by CoE Program Analyst, Donald "Gordy" Gordon on the Suicide Prevention Application Network
- **"Suicidal behavior and spiritual functioning in a sample of Veterans diagnosed with PTSD"** a presentation made during the research showcase by CoE Researcher, Dr. Marek Kopacz.

As conference goes from VA and DoD recommitted themselves to improving and developing suicide prevention programs, they found inspiration in stories told by clinicians, community members, and families whose lives have been touched by suicide.

A VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator shared her story of how suicide has impacted her life both personally and professionally. A Veterans Crisis Line Responder discussed crisis as an opportunity. An active military member spoke about a time that he himself had considered suicide.

A powerful account was given by Major General, US Army, Retired, Mark Graham whose youngest son died by suicide while studying to become an Army Doctor. Just over a year later his other son was killed by an IED in Iraq.

"Our sons died fighting different battles," he told the audience and went on to talk about "faith, hope, love" in confronting the challenges of suicide, "The presence of one caring person doubles the amount of pain a person can withstand. You are that one person."

# CoE People

Dr. Kathy Rasmussen is following her passion: helping older Veterans at risk for suicide. She is particularly interested in those with chronic psychiatric conditions and those in long-term care. Since joining the [Postdoctoral Fellowship Program](#) in 2013 at the Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, CoE, her time has been split between research and clinical practice with Veterans.

"What inspires me the most here are the older Veterans," said Dr. Rasmussen. Having a father who served in Korea and growing up in California at a time when she remembers family and friends serving in Vietnam has given her an affinity toward these Veterans. "Each generation has their own culture, a different style of communicating. I'm able to use my memories and knowledge of their era to engage with them, and this rapport helps me to help them." Dr. Rasmussen goes on to describe one of the challenges Veterans could face as they age, "When certain problems develop, such as the onset of dementia, it requires that I adjust my approach."

Males over 85 years of age have the highest rate of suicide of any group in the United States. This statistic, mirrored in the Veteran population, has held Dr. Rasmussen's interests since her graduate training at Oklahoma University. She completed her predoctoral psychology internship at CoE's academic affiliate and Upstate New York neighbor - The Department of Psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Under mentorship at CoE, Dr. Rasmussen has been involved in ongoing research projects, one of which involves the [Veterans Crisis Line](#). Findings from that study will be used to refine strategies used by responders in their efforts to assist Veterans in crisis.

"You take something from your mentors," Dr. Rasmussen said about working within the CoE Fellowship Program, "but also forge your own way." She is in the process of conducting her own research project, which, in keeping with her interests, focuses on older Veterans and seeks to examine post long-term care suicide risk and protective factors.

Kathy A. Rasmussen, PhD is the Chief Postdoctoral Fellow for the VA VISN 2 Advanced Fellowship Program in Veteran Mental Health and Suicide Prevention



## Recent CoE Publications

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**Kopacz, M. S., & Pollitt, M. J.** (2015). Delivering Chaplaincy Services to Veterans at Increased Risk of Suicide. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 21(1), 1-13.

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## CoE Team

### A note from the CoE Director & Associate Director

Welcome to the first edition of CoE News where we will be sharing stories on our research and education projects and the people who make them happen. It is our hope that this will add to VA's commitment to continually improve suicide prevention efforts for Veterans by sharing information with our partners in VA and beyond as well as the public and Veterans themselves.

Please contact us with any comments or questions you might have about the Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention.

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